

Message Text

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PAGE 01 RANGOO 02391 01 OF 02 091055Z

12

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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1900

INFO CINCPAC

AMCONSUL HONG KONG

USLO PEKING

AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY BERLIN

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 RANGOON 2391

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, XC

SUBJ: WHO'S AHEAD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?

REF: MOSCOW 7247

SUMMARY: WHILE THE LONG-TERM STRATEGIC POSITION OF THE CHINESE
VIS-A-VIS MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA REMAINS STRONG BECAUSE OF THEIR
PROXIMITY AND OTHER TANGIBLE ADVANTAGES, THEY HAVE AS YET NOT MOVED
IN CONSISTENT FASHION TO EXPLOIT THEIR ADVANTAGES. IT LOOKS FROM
RANGOON AS IF THE SOVIETS HAVE SO FAR HAD A MEASURE OF SUCCESS IN
THEIR PRC-CONTAINMENT EFFORT BECAUSE OF AN UNACCUSTOMED LIGHT-
HANDEDNESS, AND BECAUSE THEY HAVE LET HANOI CARRY THE BALL WHEREVER
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PAGE 02 RANGOO 02391 01 OF 02 091055Z

POSSIBLE. THE SOVIETS MAY BE HOPING TO HELP VIETNAM BUILD ITS SOCIETY

INTO AN ATTRACTIVE CONTRAST WITH THAT OF THE PRC. IF HANOI MANEUVERS ADROITLY IN THIS SITUATION, AND AVOIDS AGGRESSIVE EXTREMES OF ZEAL (A BIG IF), VIETNAM COULD TURN OUT TO BE THE BIG WINNER IN ECONOMIC STRENGTH AND DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, ANYHOW, INSOFAR AS THE VIETNAMESE STAY RELATIVELY MODERATE, THAT WOULD NOT NECESSARILY MAKE THE U.S. AND JAPAN--OR NON-COMMUNIST SOUTHEAST ASIA--BIG LOSERS.

END SUMMARY.

1. A YEAR HAVING PASSED SINCE THE INDOCHINA CATASTROPHES, IT MAY BE APPROPRIATE TO REEXAMINE THE INTERPLAY OF POWER RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE REGION. IN THE ASSUMED COMPETITION BETWEEN THE CHINESE AND THE SOVIETS, OBSERVERS IN RANGOON WOULD GENERALLY AGREE THAT THE PRC STARTS WITH SOME VERY IMPORTANT LONG-TERM STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES. FOR MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIANS, THE PRC'S GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY IS AN OVERWHELMING AND INTRACTABLE FACT OF LIFE. IF CHINA LAUNCHED A MILITARY ATTACK, IT COULD OVERRUN MAINLAND SEA IN A MATTER OF WEEKS. SHORT OF OUTRIGHT MILITARY AGGRESSION, IN MOST OF THE COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE CHINESE HAVE ASSETS IN THE FORM OF PRO- PRC INSURGENCIES OR THE OVERSEAS CHINESE WHO MIGHT BE COUNTED ON FOR SOME DEGREE OF SUPPORT IN CERTAIN TYPES OF LIMITED AGGRESSION. AS TO OTHER KINDS OF INFLUENCE, THE CHINESE, WITH THEIR LONG VIEW OF HISTORY, ARE TRADITIONALLY GOOD AT THE WAITING GAME; THEIR DIPLOMACY, PARTICULARLY IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT, HAS GENERALLY BEEN MUCH SMOOTHER THAN THAT OF THE SOVIETS, WHO ARE WHITE-FACED AND REMOTE, WHOSE ASSISTANCE CAN BE TAPPED ONLY WITH SOME RISK OF AN INORDINATE INCREASE IN PRC HOSTILITY, AND WHOSE DIPLOMACY HAS OFTEN BEEN GRACELESS AND HEAVY-HANDED.

2. HOWEVER, RELATIVE TO THE MAGNITUDE OF THEIR POTENTIAL ADVANTAGE, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE CHINESE HAVE SO FAR NOT DONE AS WELL AS THEY COULD HAVE. AN INITIAL GUB REACTION TO INDOCHINA EVENTS LAST YEAR WAS, ALONG WITH MOST OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENTS, TO CASE ABOUT FOR WAYS TO "ADJUST TO THE NEW REALITIES" OF THE REGION--I.E., FOR WAYS TO DISPLAY TO THE CHINESE AND THE NEW INDOCHINESE REGIMES A WILLINGNESS TO ACCOMMODATE. NE WIN, LIKE OTHER SEA LEADERS, WORKED OUT A TRIP TO PEKING AS SOON AS HE DECENTLY COULD. IN THE COMMUNIQUE AT THE END OF HIS PEKING VISIT, NE WIN ACCEPTED TWO ANTI-HEGEMONY STATEMENTS, TO THE VISIBLE CHAGRIN OF LOCAL SOVIET DIPLOMATS. AS OF NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1975, ANYWAY, IT LOOKED AS THOUGH THE SOVIETS

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PAGE 03 RANGOO 02391 01 OF 02 091055Z

WERE ON THE WAY DOWN, THE CHINESE ON THEIR WAY UP. HALF A YEAR LATER, IT IS APPARENT THAT THAT PROJECTION OF THE TREND HAS NOT BEEN BORNE OUT. THE CHINESE ARE NOT IN ANY ABSOLUTE SENSE DOWN; THE STATUS OF THEIR INFLUENCE IS ABOUT THE SAME; BUT THEY HAVE NOT RISEN. THE SOVIETS ARE IN A BETTER POSITION THAN PROJECTED; AND THE VIETNAMESE POSITION HAS IMPROVED CONSIDERABLY.

3. THE CHINESE FAILURE TO EXPLOIT THEIR POTENTIAL ADVANTAGE IN RELA-

TIONS WITH BURMA WAS MOST CLEARLY TIED IN WITH THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE
IR
POLICY INVOLVING THE BCP. THAT POLICY WAS NEITHER CONSISTENTLY SOFT
NOR CONSISTENTLY HARD. ON THE ONE HAND, WHILE THE CHINESE APPEARED
TO BE RESTRICTING THEIR ALREADY LIMITED SUPPORT STILL FURTHER,
THEY DID NOT DISTANCE THEMSELVES FROM THE BCP INSURGENCY TO
A POINT WHERE THEY MIGHT HAVE GREATLY ENHANCED THEIR INFLUENCE IN BUR
MA
BY PUTTING THE GUB UNDER A REAL DEBT OF GRATITUDE. ON THE OTHER HAND,
THE PRC DID NOT SEEM TO BE TRYING TO PUT A THREATENING DEGREE OF
PRESSURE ON THE BURMESE OR EXTRACT POLITICAL ADVANTAGE OUT OF THE HARD-

LINE LEVERAGE THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN PROVIDED BY QUITE FEASIBLE DEGREES

OF ESCALATION OF PRC SUPPORT FOR THE BCP. WHATEVER THE REASONS, THE
SITUATION IS THAT PRC SUPPORT OF THE BCP CONTINUES TO BE A MAJOR
FACTOR IN GUB SUSPICIONS OF PRC INTENTIONS, KEEPING THE BURMESE
FROM ADOPTING THE KIND OF WARMLY PRO-CHINESE POSTURE THEY DISPLAYED
IN THE EARLY 1950'S.

4. ONE REASON WHY THE USSR HAS (IN MY OPINION) DONE BETTER THAN
MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED IS ITS RELATIVELY SOPHISTICATED, RELATIVELY
LOW-KEY REACTION TO THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS' MOVES TOWARD ACCOMMODATION
WITH PEKING. HERE IN BURMA, THERE WAS AN INITIAL FLURRY OF OVER-RE-
ACTION, WHEN IT LOOKED AS THOUGH THE SOVIETS WERE GOING TO MAKE THEM-
SELVES UNPOPULAR AND RIDICULOUS BY TYPICAL TABLE-THUMPING; BUT
AMBASSADOR ELIZAVETINE ABOUT-FACED EARLY IN THE YEAR, AND BEGAN POOH-
POOHING OR EVEN DENYING ANY PRO-CHINESE TILT ON THE GUB'S PART. NOR
DID THE SOVIETS BECOME AS CRUDE AS USUAL IN ATTEMPTING TO COUNTER
CHINESE INFLUENCE. FOR EXAMPLE, SINCE THE BURMESE HAD BEEN REBUFFED
BY THE CHINESE IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH PARTY-TO-PARTY RELATIONS,

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PAGE 04 RANGOO 02391 01 OF 02 091055Z

SOME BURMESE EXPECTED (AND SOME, REPORTEDLY, INCLUDING BSPP JOINT
GENERAL SECRETARY U THAUNG KYI, MIGHT HAVE BEEN RECEPTIVE TO) A
CONTRASTING SOVIET ESCALATION OF THE FRATERNAL PARTY RELATIONSHIP; BUT

THE SOVIETS (ACCORDING TO LEFTIST COMMENTATOR U THEIN PE MYINT)
WERE AWARE THAT THE APPEARANCE OF A BEARHUG WOULD HURT THEIR CAUSE,
AND HAVE LEANED OVER BACKWARD TO AVOID SENDING TOPHEAVY PARTY
DELEGATIONS TO BURMA. GDR AMBASSADOR SIEGFRIED KUEHNEL ALSO GIVES
THE SOVIETS HIGH MARKS FOR RELATIVE SOPHISTICATION IN THIS REGARD.
ANOTHER INSTANCE OF SOPHISTICATION HE CITES IS THE SOVIETS'
APPARENT SOFT-PEDALING OF THE ASIAN COLLECTIVE SECURITY SCHEME AT
HE RECENT PARTY CONGRESS.

5. WITHIN THE PURELY BURMESE CONTEXT IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE SOVIET
POSITION HAS BEEN ENHANCED (CERTAINLY IT HAS NOT BEEN HARMED) BY THE

DISMISSAL OF GENERAL TIN OO AND THE RESULTING INCREASE IN INFLUENCE, AT LEAST FOR THE MOMENT, OF HIS CHIEF RIVAL, GENERAL SAN YU. SAN YU IS REPORTEZHYY MORE FAVORABLY DISPOSED TO THE SOVIET BRAND OF SOCIALISM THAN WAS TIN OO. HOWEVER, SAN YU IS BY NO MEANS A SOVIET TOOL, AND EVEN THE SUPPOSITION THAT HE FAVORS TURNING TO THE USSR FOR ARMS AID AGAINST PRC-BACKED INSURGENTS GROSSLY MISREPRESENTS HIS POSITION. AT ANY RATE, THE SEEMINLY ENHANCED SOVIET POSITION OWES MUCH MORE TO THE KIND OF FACTORS DESCRIBED HERE, AND PARTICULARLY TO THE LACK OF HEAVY-HANDED SOVIET INTERFERENCE, THAN IT OWES TO THE SHIFT FROM TIN OO TO SAN YU.

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PAGE 01 RANGOO 02391 02 OF 02 090728Z

11

ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02

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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1901

INFO CINCPAC

AMCONSUL HONG KONG

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AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 RANGOON 2391

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

6. SOVIET AMBASSADOR ELIZAVENTINE AND HIS DEPUTY BORIS JILIAEV, WHEN ASKED SEPARATELY WHO'S AHEAD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, ATTEMPTED WITH PARTY-

LINE UNANIMITY TO DENY THAT THE SOVIETS ARE IN COMPETITION WITH THE CHINESE FOR INFLUENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. BOTH SUGGEST THAT THE DANGER OF U.S. EFFORTS TO INVOLVE THE COUNTRIES OF THE REGION IN SOME "NEW QUARREL" (OPPONENT UNSPECIFIED) IS STILL A FACTOR. AFTER SOME DISCUSSION, BOTH MEN WILL ADMIT, HOWEVER, TO CONCERN ABOUT THE DANGER OF THE

PRC'S EXTENDING ITS INFLUENCE OVER COUNTRIES TO THE SOUTH. THEY WILL NOT ADMIT THAT THE SOVIETS ARE TRYING TO CONSTRUCT A CORDON SANITAIRE OF VIETNAM, LAOS, BURMA AND INDIA, BUT EACH EXPRESSES THE EXPECTATION THAT VIETNAM "ACTING ON ITS OWN, NOT AS A SOVIET AGENT" MAY MAKE ITS INFLUENCE FELT THROUGHOUT SEOUTHEAST ASIA AS A FORCE FOR INDEPENDENCE
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PAGE 02 RANGOO 02391 02 OF 02 090728Z

(I.E., FROM CHINA).

7. THAT THE SOVIETS THINK IN TERMS OF A SOLID ANTI-CHINESE ALLIANCE COMPRISING VIETNAM, LAOS, BURMA AND INDIA SEEMS DOUBTFUL; AS JILIAEV POINTS OUT, BURMA IS NOT A LIKELY AVENUE FOR THE EXTENSION OF CHINESE INFLUENCE INTO ANY OTHER AREA, AND HENCE DOES NOT NEED TO BE BLOCKED. AT THE SAME TIME, I ASSUME THE SOVIETS WOULD NOT WISH TO SEE THEIR PUTATIVE POSITION OF STRENGTH IN LAOS OUTFLANKED, AND THEREFORE WISH AT LEAST TO KEEP BURMA OUT OF THE CHINESE ORBIT. PERHAPS A LOOSE ENTENTE AMONG THE NORTHERN TIER OF SEA COUNTRIES IS MORE WHAT THE SOVIETS HAVE IN MIND.

8. THE IDEA OF (NORTH) VIETNAM AS A POTENTIAL BULWARK AGAINST PRC HEGEMONY IS NOT UNFAMILIAR, EVEN IN THE U.S. IT HAS HAD SOME CURRENCY IN BURMA FOR A LONG TIME, AND THE WISHFUL SPECULATION THAT VIETNAM MIGHT BECOME SUCH A BULWARK WAS IMPLICIT IN COMMENTS WE BEGAN HEARING FROM HIGHLY PLACED BURMESE A YEAR AGO. AT THE SAME TIME, THE BURMESE SEEMED ALSO TO BE WORRIED THAT THE VIETNAMESE, OR THEIR LAOTIAN STOOGES,

MIGHT GIVE SUPPORT TO THE BCP OR OTHER INSURGENTS, IF ONLY PASSIVELY, THROUGH THE SALE TO THEM OF CAPTURED AMERICAN ARMS. AT THE TIME OF NE WIN'S TRIP TO PEKING, HE REPORTEDLY WAS UNEASY ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY

THAT THE SOVIETS MIGHT REACT TO BURMA'S ACCOMMODATION WITH CHINA BY ENCOURAGING VIETNAM AND LAOS TO HELP THE INSURGENTS. THE FACT THAT THE LAOTIANS HAVE THUS FAR DENIED SUPPORT AND SACTUARY TO THE BCP HAS BEEN A FACTOR DISPOSING BURMA TOWARD ASSOCIATION WITH HANOI AND, INDIRECTLY, TOWARD FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION.

9. GDR AMBASSADOR SIEGFRIED KUEHNEL, IN TALKING ABOUT VIETNAM'S FUTURE

ROLE IN THE REGION, SPEAKS OF THE "SURPRISING MILDNESS" OF VIETNAM'S ATTITUDES TOWARD FOREIGN COUNTRIES SO FAR (IN VIEW OF THE "BITTERNESS OF MUCH OF THEIR RECENT EXPERIENCE" E.G., THE GALLING FACT OF THE THAI

PERMITTING THE BOMBING OF VIETNAM FROM THAI BASES), AND SAYS HE HOPES THAT THE VIETNAMESE WILL GAIN INFLUENCE ON THE BASIS OF THEIR POSITIVE

CHARACTERISTICS, SUCH AS THEIR INDUSTRY, INTELLIGENCE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY, AND NOT MERELY ON THE BASIS OF MILITARY POWER:
"IN TIME, WE HOPE VIETNAM CAN PROVIDE AN ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO
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PAGE 03 RANGOO 02391 02 OF 02 090728Z

THE SOCIETY OF THE PRC." IN VIEW OF KUEHNEL'S WORDING ("WE HOPE...")
AND THE FACT HE HAD JUST RETURNED FROM MEETINGS IN BERLIN, I HAD THE
IMPRESSION HE MIGHT BE REFLECTING BLOC POLICY. IF SO, VIETNAM MAY
BE ONTO A VERY GOOD THING. AS I RECALL, OUR OWN MASSIVE SUPPORT OF
INDIA FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS REFLECTED A SIMILAR HOPE ABOUT THE
POTENTIAL CONTRAST BETWEEN INDIA'S SOCIETY AND THAT OF THE PRC.

10. COMMENT: ALL THE ABOVE IS IMPRESSIONISTIC AS WELL AS PERHAPS
FORESHORTENED BY THE CLOSE-IN PERSPECTIVE OF RANGOON. FURTHER OBSER-
VATION FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES IS NEEDED BEFORE ANY FIRM CONCLU-
SIONS CAN BE DRAWN. SPECULATIVELY, HOWEVER, IF THE SOVIETS HAVE INDEED

DECIDED TO SHAPE THEIR SOUTHEAST ASIA POLICY AROUND SUPPORT FOR HANOI
AS AN ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO THE CHINESE MODEL, AND IF THE VIETNAMESE

COOPERATE BY REMAINING RELATIVELY MODERATE, THIS MIGHT BE GOOD
NEWS. ATTRACTIVE MODELS DO NOT GO AROUND COMMITTING AGGRESSION; ONE
MAY HOPE THEY WILL AT LEAST BE DISCREET ABOUT SPONSORING EVEN INDIRECT

AGGRESSION. OVER THE LONG TERM, IT MIGHT ALSO BE WORTH NOTING THAT
ATTRACTIVE MODELS MAKE BETTER TRADING PARTNERS FOR THE U.S. AND
JAPAN. IF, IN ADDITION, THE SOVIETS CONTINUE TO KEEP THEIR OWN ROLE
SOMEWHAT IN THE BACKGROUND, LETTING HANOI CARRY THE BALL, THE
INCENTIVE FOR THE CHINESE TO ESCALATE THEIR OWN SUPPORT FOR
INSURGENCIES IN THE REGION MAY BE LACKING. THE MEDIUM-TERM ANSWER
TO "WHO'S AHEAD" MIGHT JUST POSSIBLY TURN OUT TO BE "VIETNAM, BUT
THE NON-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES ARE NOT FAR BEHIND." IT SHOULD ALSO BE
RECALLED, HOWEVER THAT THE U.S. WAS ULTIMATELY FRUSTRATED BY
INDIA'S FAILURE TO BECOME A TRULY ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE MODEL TO
THAT REPRESENTED BY THE PRC. THAT THE VIETNAMESE, WHO ARE FIERCELY
NATIONALISTIC AND HAVE AN UNEQUALED CAPACITY FOR RECALCITRANCE,
WILL FOR VERY LONG PLAY THE SOVIETS' OR ANYONE ELSE'S GAME SEEMS
DOUBTFUL. THEY MAY, HOWEVER, PLAY THE MODERATE ROLE LONG ENOUGH
TO BUY A LITTLE MORE TIME FOR NON-COMMUNIST SEA TO MATURE.
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